Introducing Vigilant Audiences

This groundbreaking collection of essays examines the scope and consequences of digital vigilance — a phenomenon emerging on a global scale, which sees digital audiences using social platforms to shape social and political life. Longstanding forms of moral scrutiny and justice seeking are disseminated through our contemporary media landscape, and researchers are increasingly recognising the significance of societal impacts effected by digital media.

The authors engage with a range of cross-disciplinary perspectives in order to explore the actions of a vigilant digital audience — denunciation, shaming, doxing — and to consider the role of the press and other public figures in supporting or contesting these activities. In turn, the volume illuminates several tensions underlying these justice seeking activities — from their capacity to reproduce categorical forms of discrimination, to the diverse motivations of the wider audiences who participate in vigilant denunciations.

This timely volume presents thought-provoking case studies drawn both from high-profile Anglo-American contexts, and from developments in regions that have received less coverage in English-language scholarship. It is distinctive in its focus on the contested boundary between policing and entertainment, and on the various contexts in which the desire to seek retribution converges with the desire to consume entertainment.

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Empowerment, Social Distrust or Co-production of Security: A Case Study of Digital Vigilantism in Morocco

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Introduction

As a licensed nurse in the United States, William M. posed online as a young woman planning to commit suicide who could explain to others how to do so. Using this deception, he formed misleading bonds with visitors to suicide chat rooms to persuade them to end their lives in front of a webcam (Huey et al., 2012). Pursuing his obsession with suicide, William used various screen names, but overlooked the Internet’s potential to reveal his real identity. However, some users recognised his exploitation of their psychological vulnerability and his betrayal of social trust while assisting victims to hang themselves (Anderson, 2010).

Investigations started when a team of women took interest in this suicide support. The team featured people who had direct as well as second-hand exposure to William’s attempts. (Anderson, 2010). Using her digital literacy, one woman discovered that William used multiple screen names, and more importantly that social media platforms helped him exacerbate suicidal thoughts. Due to their “security demand” (Mireanu, 2014, p. iii), the woman collected William’s location and IP address, and communicated the affair to the police in her own hometown, to the FBI, to the Ottawa Police Service, and then to the
Minnesota police (Huey et al., 2012). Despite inadequate legal measures against encouraging self-harm online, she continued to participate, as an ordinary person, in promoting security and reducing risk factors in her surroundings. She engaged in online vigilantism using her digital skills, trying to help curb a fatal cybercrime. She revisited police departments persistently to prevent William from causing more deaths. During a chat, she also urged William to turn on his webcam, and took a picture of his face (Porter, 2010; Huey et al., 2012). Her perseverance deterred his digital incitement to suicide and helped illustrate the ability of different parties to produce — i.e. to illustrate the co-production of — safety. She saved the life of a depressed friend of hers by initiating an investigation into William’s actions before handing the affair over to the police. Meanwhile, in approaching different police departments, she indirectly questioned their role. That is, when law enforcement agencies fail to act because the law does not empower them to do so, they drive citizens to feel a security void that they bridge with collective or individual initiatives with or without police consent. While this can be a symptom of state failure (Szescilo, 2017), the resultant individual and community empowerment strengthens the constructive participation of citizens in controlling their environment.

Digital vigilantism does not deal solely with cybercrime, however. It also denounces embodied infringements of the law (Wehmhoener, 2010). When bystanders witness an event they deem offensive, criminal or discriminatory, they cascade this feeling through uploadable content. This occurred in a rape attempt in Benguerir, near Marrakech in the middle of Morocco. In late March 2018, a video went viral online, especially on Facebook and YouTube. It featured a boy attempting to rape a teenage girl, who was resisting and yelling sharply “don’t you have a sister!? Would you want someone to do this to her??” (Khalaf, 2018). Digital vigilantes doxed — or shared personal information about — the assaulter immediately, which facilitated his identification. The video was originally shot to exhibit the attacker’s masculine power and film the rape, but the moral outrage on social media urged the police to react. The video and the shared information online, such as name, age and neighbourhood helped in the manhunt, while the press used the doxing to locate the crime scene, identify the victim and show her family’s anguish. Together, these factors led the assailant to receive a
ten-year imprisonment term. His friend, who shot the incident, received an eight-year sentence. The third boy, who uploaded the video several months after the incident, received a two-year jail term for hiding the evidence instead of sharing it online or handing it on to the police once he obtained it (Babas, 2018). Ubiquitous devices that people buy mainly for communication thus hold “potential for civic engagement and empowerment through social media” (Chen, 2017, p. 2). The catchphrase “don’t you have a sister?” also went viral as a hashtag (Khalaf, 2018) to denounce the sexual assault, and it appeared in the titles of songs and amateur short movies on YouTube to frame public denunciation of sexual harassment, and perhaps to link vigilantism with empowerment. As such, technology enables the transfer of frustration online, or the digitisation of vigilantism against hostility and animosity in society.

Digital vigilantism refers to the active online participation of some self-appointed person or group in promoting the rule of law. It is an organic, constructive contribution to social order, aided by the transforming role of the Internet. Though intentional and programmatic, it is performed by actors who do not necessarily “have high levels of [social, economic or symbolic] capital” (Mireanu, 2014, p. 9). It incorporates bottom-up initiatives, sometimes with the consent or encouragement of the state (Chang et al., 2016), to maintain one’s secure environment or to enforce the law by exposing wrongdoing online. Vigilantism, consequently, redefines engagement for the public good, since citizens engage directly with a perceived lack of security, lack of state awareness or inadequate state presence.

Digital vigilantism comprises a number of phases. First, social uproar is caused by the amorality and objectionable nature of some uploaded content. Audiences who feel offended display their attitude via shaming or doxing. They create “a mode of informal regulation” or “cyber social control” within online communities (Wehmhoener, 2010, p. 11). This open trial online often triggers different reactions from the police, the press, commentators, friends, family members or colleagues of bullies and victims. The crowdsourcing of content and reactions makes each group a prosumer audience in its own way. They watch the event and interact according to their abilities and responsibilities, towards

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1 The term ‘prosumer’ was coined by the American futurist Alvin Toffler in his *The Third Wave* (1980) to denote simultaneous consumption and production
the common goal of maintaining social order. In addition, digital vigilantism warrants autonomous citizenship. Wehmhoener (2010, p. 10) even describes it as “a form of autonomous citizenship”, especially when the state condones its potential repercussions or “downside risks” (Chang et al., 2016, p. 108). With the ubiquity of smart devices and social media, ordinary citizens, including illiterate ones, find ways to engage socially (Khamis & Vaugh, 2011). The traditionally literate and illiterate share online spaces and both can have an impact, due to rampant e-interactivity and participation in particular. They collaborate and cross-fertilise, though the limits of that collaboration require clearer demarcation. Recent scholarship has acknowledged that “literacy now encompasses much more than just reading, writing, speaking and listening” but also “computer, digital, and media literacy as well” (Swan, 2017, p. 10). However, whether basic digital skills transform into real-life reading, writing, language accuracy or media interpretation, for instance, requires more research.

Frequent vigilantism may indicate distrust in the authorities. Since “vigilantism results from unwillingness of the ruling upper class to address security needs of poorer populations” (Szescilo, 2017, p. 149), it occurs less in contexts where the police are trusted, or where they automatically guarantee the rule of law. Hoffman (2012) as cited in Szescilo (2017, p. 154) contends that “vigilantism does not play a significant role in countries where the state provides its security institutions with adequate capacities”. When citizens trust the agents of the law, vigilantism is less widespread (Scheffers, 2015, p. 12). When corruption, “indicia of illegality” and impunity abound, vigilantes react with doubt, uncertainty and caution. They may refrain from replacing law institutions, lest attention swerves from the criminal action to the vigilante reaction. Instead, due to their shrinking trust in the security system, vigilantes volunteer individually or collectively for self-defence, with or without state encouragement. They contribute their different capacities to meet the increasing “demand for supplementary policing and security services” (Chang et al., 2016, p. 101).

Vigilantism, though it empowers citizens, may cause repercussions. A key downside online is retaliation. Victims, their relatives or sympathisers may seek revenge, especially when sentences are too lenient for the crimes committed. Citizens may develop a habit of meting
out punishment with their own hands, which blurs the meanings of law and chaos. Another problem is the infringement upon one’s privacy. Anonymous doxing may result in the sharing of information about family members or private relationships that do not pertain to the affair under scrutiny. Unexpectedly, some remote relatives of perpetrators may become victims of cyber-bullying for reasons they may not understand well.

Against this backdrop, this chapter delves qualitatively into a case of digital vigilantism in Morocco. It explores the social and communicative practices of security-seeking citizens. It tackles the empowering impact of digitisation and the context of the Arab Spring on the location of online vigilantism in the kingdom. The analysis considers a case of informal vigilantism; a one-off event that relates to the educational system and to classroom violence in particular. The incident exemplifies the increasing public awareness of online agency, social justice, the rule of law and constructive citizenship, rather than mob justice, in a public sphere where civil agency is regaining prominence.

Online Empowerment in the Arab Spring Context

The Internet, as an online public sphere, provides a space for the interplay of power dynamics, especially when freedom of speech is suppressed in embodied interactions. Citizens use online applications and platforms to contest political practices and engage in community wellbeing. They exert impact by sharing news and views, uploading content to support or denounce given causes, contacting MPs and orchestrating activism. Thus, the Internet empowers committed citizens when political practices neglect public concerns (Khamis & Vaugh, 2011; Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011).

The concept of empowerment is seminal to understand social movement and change. It refers to both a process and an outcome. It is, first, “a process by which people gain control of their lives, democratic participation in the lives of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment” (Perkins & Zimmerman, 2005, p. 570). Empowering processes lead to empowered individuals, organisations or communities (Zimmerman, 2000). Psychologically, when they are empowered, citizens handle personal problems and
opportunities, rather than feeling that circumstances constantly weaken them. Beyond individual concerns, empowerment channels the decisions and solutions of organisations and communities to improve their environment. Citizens collectively crowd-source their perceived control (the belief that one can influence the outcomes of a process they take part in), their critical awareness (knowing when to engage in conflict and when to avoid it) and their effective participation to pressure for social and policy change, and to enhance community living (Zimmerman, 2000). Access to resources, especially the media, is a key empowering factor. With ubiquitous media today, empowerment processes grow more decentralised and, probably, more impactful.

When empowerment fails to affect public policies, trust in public institutions wanes. For the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, “[t]rust is an attitude that we have towards people [or institutions] whom we hope will be trustworthy, where trustworthiness is a property, not an attitude” (McLeod, 2015, n.p.). Thus, trust co-exists with, sometimes tiny, doubt. For, if the trusted person or institution will pull through for us doubtlessly, then trust is needless (ibid.). However, trust as an attitude accumulates from reliable acts that culminate in trustworthiness as a property. That is, the state slowly and increasingly becomes trustworthy after citizens rely on its services several times, and after it does not betray their confidence. Institutional trust is important because it demarcates official relations and delimits responsibilities. Civic trust in institutions generates social capital, whilst loss of faith in public institutions constitutes a crisis in democracy (Cook & Gronke, 2005, p. 3). Contrariwise, it is difficult to fathom or accept that public institutions betray public trust (McLeod, 2015), which usually arouses defiant symbolic or material reactions. Therefore, lack of trust, or the open expression of distrust, denotes a failure to assume pre-trust or post-trust responsibilities.

Trusting the state becomes hard when it develops a reputation for corruption. Pre-Arab-Spring regimes, for example, repressed free speech, monopolised public media and disdained representative democracy. Consequently, nonconformist voices felt unwelcome.

During the Arab Spring, social media, or “dense informal networks”, structured social activism and harnessed mobilisation online (Pérez-Altable, 2016, p. 19). They have affected social life and the perception of social activism (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). For Howard and Parks (2012),
social media activism consists of three key elements: infrastructure; digital content; and the people who produce and consume that content. People are essential for digital vigilantism, possibly more so than infrastructure, since content dissemination online results from their effort and initiatives to express their individual or collective aspirations, concerns or demands. Consequently, for the public, social networks enhance activism for already-existing causes. They quickly recognise that it is “the flow of attention, not information (which we already have too much of), that matters” (Tufekci, 2018) for dissatisfied citizens. Despite the state’s mass surveillance, which involved cutting off Internet and cellular services and gate-keeping public-service media, protesters in different Tahrir — or Freedom — Squares kept challenging one government after another in Arab capitals (ibid.). Social media mainly strengthened the public ability to attract attention to the visibility of social agency and advocacy.

Furthermore, the 2011 uprisings contested the concept of security. Protesters demanded political, economic and social security at large, while regimes viewed social unrest as a threat to state safety as a whole. In that conflict between strategic narratives over public safety, the public has become more outspoken, using the empowerment of social media and learning from developments in other Arab Spring countries (cross-fertilisation).

Meeting the practical needs of the uprisings required three roles to be fulfilled. The majority of activists flooded Freedom Squares, whilst others galvanised marches online and denigrated state interventions (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Chen, 2017). A third group formed neighbourhood watches, especially in remote areas. They prevented burglars from exploiting the chaos, and also state militias from exacerbating it for legitimising state power. Neighbourhood vigilantes, accordingly, spread under failed or “dead states”, as the Egyptian minister of justice put it (Middle East Online, 2013). State violence resulted in public distrust and the taking of laws into civilian hands. Sometimes, neighbourhood vigilantism led to mob lynching. Videos of slain wrongdoers in the Egyptian countryside, for instance, went viral to warn potential perpetrators (AsiaNews, 2013). In Tunisia, the idea of ‘self-protecting civilians’ was short-lived because the regime collapsed without squashing protests.
Due to geopolitical proximity, Moroccan citizens often share advocacy strategies with Arab countries. During street protests in 2011, slogans demanded the ousting of corruption and despotism instead of the ousting of the whole regime. Marchers hoped for a democratic transition. The Moroccan regime, however, resorted to an exceptionalist narrative (Chalfaouat, 2015; Chahir, 2019). It spread the idea that Morocco is unique in North Africa: the Ottoman Empire could not conquer Morocco; France took Morocco for a protectorate, not a colony. Following the same logic, replicating Arab Spring revolts in Morocco was needless since the regime was much less coercive than neighbouring ones. The devil lay in the details, however. Though governments performed their duties, policies kept regressing. Meanwhile, analyses on Facebook articulated frustration with the status quo. The spark of the Arab Spring, promoted by ubiquitous smart phones, indicated dissatisfaction with the state. To recognise public activism, the state amended the constitution in 2011, further empowering citizens with participatory democracy measures such as petitions and memoranda. Therefore, the impact of the Internet on public conscience enabled citizens to reinforce the rule of law. Today, protesters still take to the street with political demands. They require the right to jobs, freedom of speech, better infrastructure, etc. Visual content from those events abounds on social media, as exemplified by the Rif Hirak in 2017 (Lorch & Bukhard, 2017) or teachers’ marches in 2018 (Chahir, 2019). Yet, when political demands abate, social demands surge. When sit-ins or street marches crumble, social activism shifts to denouncing violence between the police and citizens, or between teachers and students, for instance. Consequently, ordinary citizens use online platforms as communicative catalysts to mobilise bottom-up aspirations. They share videos that record social deviance, street thievery, harassment, police bribery or the exchange of violence. Their active digital vigilantism stresses security to make bullies accountable for their crimes.

In short, developments after the Arab Spring display inextricable and irreversible ties between the offline and the online. As society rushes to cope with technological changes, connected devices empower citizens to record daily events and share content with audiences in uncontrollable trajectories. This online empowerment boosts common citizens’ sense of change-making, and their ability to
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improve their immediate environment. After the Arab Spring, street activism nationally, regionally or locally has not waned, while the amount of smartphones, social media accounts and circulating data has shot up. Though media empowerment does not guarantee change, activism challenges political, economic or social wrongdoing, which supports communities. Via digital devices, access to information and opinions heightens the questioning the status quo. The following section provides a glimpse of the digital landscape in Morocco.

The Digital Reality in Morocco

Communications in Morocco are among the most vibrant in Africa for several reasons. The first is demography. Today, around 87% of the population are younger than fifty-five. Schoolchildren do not receive an adequate education: around 400,000 pupils drop out annually. This youth drain aggravates illiteracy rates and impedes employment plans. Persistent youth unemployment, soaring corruption levels and aspirations for better living conditions push public anger onto social media.

Secondly, ownership of connectable devices has increased. In 2017, 60% of families (20% of the entire population) owned desktops or tablets, with a six-percent increase from 2016. In addition, according to ANRT\(^2\) annual data (2018), 99.8% of Moroccan urban and rural families use mobile phones. Around four members of every family possess phones, amounting to around 25 million mobile phones, 73% of which are smartphones. Eighty-six per cent of the phones are used to access the Internet. Their owners prosume and circulate huge amounts of information, opinions, attitudes and trends. One aspect of the social impact is the diversity of possibilities for connection this enables. Ninety-four point seven per cent of Internet users can be found on Facebook, Instagram or WhatsApp. Ninety-eight per cent of youngsters aged between 15 and 24 (i.e. around 6.5 million), participate on social platforms on a daily basis, while Facebook users number around 17.5 million (NapoleonCat, 2018). Moroccans currently rank fourth in Africa and second in the Arab world on Facebook.

\(^2\) National Agency for Regulating Telecommunications.
Moreover, the digital infrastructure is helpful. Morocco postures as a technology hub in Africa, due to its geostrategical location at the crossroads of international fibre cables. It participates in a technological race to lead North Africa, adopting policies that encourage connectivity and ensure surveillance and stability (Chalfaouat, 2015). That is why the kingdom ranks eighty-fifth globally in e-governance readiness, offering broadband since 2004 and leading Africa with more than 400,000 active ADSL lines and a high level of wireless connection (4G). To boost mobile broadband connectivity in rural areas, Long Term Evolution services were set up in 2015, after upgrading fibre optic networks.

In addition, around 3000 e-news websites cover national and local events continuously. In 2015, the Ministry of Communication certified 204 online news outlets, added to rampant national, regional and local uncertified news websites and blogs, which boosts immediate access to news and frequent social media interaction. Therefore, the post-2011 power dynamics capitalise on digital transformations to create a perpetual phenomenon of social activism. Activists favour the digital sphere, which has resulted in increased vigilantism, sometimes fuelled by the equally rising symptoms of social problems.

Digital Vigilantism in Morocco

Co-production (public participation in the production) of security in Morocco is not new. Even official institutions and media outlets directly or indirectly encourage the co-production of security. For instance, the police hang photos of wanted criminals inside police stations and city halls, expecting citizens to help. Public radio stations, too, regularly broadcast news about fugitives to warn of the danger they pose, and seek public help in capturing them.

However, organic vigilantism ensues from citizen initiatives, rather than guided participation. In some rural areas, ordinary people conduct their own investigations and sentence perpetrators, especially robbers, in weekly markets (The Journal, 2015). A crowd might fatally assault a culprit so that no one person in the mob would be accused directly. Thus, when burglars exploit the reduced police presence in isolated or remote areas, the public executes them, acting as an unofficial
replacement of the state. Instead of benefiting from the situation, robbers often run the risk of becoming its victims.

Some websites likewise encourage the participation of ordinary citizens in reducing corruption, with mixed success. For example, Ushahidi, an international group that monitors election transparency, launched their Moroccan site in 2011, marsad.ma, but the experiment was short-lived. In 2012, it became mamdawrinch.com (“we will not bribe”), a platform for anonymous reporting. Mamfakinch.com (“no concessions”), a blogging platform for reporting corruption and rejecting despotism, waned along with the February 20 Movement and folded after official harassment. The platform challenged official stories and interpretations of events, and exemplified the interplay between state power and social resistance online. It carried weekly coverage of “February 20th Movement protests simultaneously taking place throughout the country, in addition to international chapter protests in Europe and elsewhere” (Errazzouki, 2017, p. 368). It systematically offered a Twitter-linked “live feed where individuals participating in the demonstrations could include a hashtag in their tweets that would automatically stream their tweets on Mamfakinch” (ibid.). After building visitors’ trust, Mamfakinch’s work galvanised vigilantism as the tweets “tended to include both photos as well as videos and were filtered through a marked map hosted on Google Maps” (ibid.). Street protesters, who accessed the platform feed directly, benefited from its empowering ability to channel their perceived control, critical awareness and effective participation. However, the platform’s “brief prominence dwindled when the Moroccan state countered its impact” with surveillance, malware and accusations of undermining national security (ibid., p. 380). Another example, Manchoufouch.com, is a website and Android application that records the time and location of sexual harassment. Yet, the project’s ability to gain public trust, empower harassment victims or galvanise agency remains to be seen.

Online vigilantes prefer anonymity due to their distrust of the legal system. Accordingly, organised digital vigilantism is often played down. When some journalists investigate corruption, fraud or mismanagement, other state-related journalists defame them by framing their efforts as disturbing, contradictory or useless. Sometimes, evidence of mass surveillance is produced in order to contain disturbing voices and keep
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freedom of speech within prescribed limits (Errazzouki, 2017). Most vigilantism websites have folded, to be replaced with social media activism.

Informal digital vigilantism abounds on social media to denounce different types of wrongdoing. Vigilante individuals, organisations, or communities monitor official corruption or scandal, such as when the police force citizens to give bribes (Sekkouri, 2008), riot police suppress citizen behaviour (Chahir, 2019) or a teacher assaults a student. For example, in Targuist, a cannabis-farming city, four videos exposed police officers collecting bribes from drivers, especially smugglers. These videos, which were not uploaded simultaneously, zoomed in on corrupt law-enforcement agents facilitating crime. Social and traditional media widely covered the scandal, which coincided with a royal visit to the region. Consequently, the police officers were arrested or deported thanks to the Targuist Sniper or “Targuist Commando” (Sekkouri, 2008). Vigilantism was thus perceived as a constructive participation in reducing corruption, while the authors of the footage evaded official tracking and punishment.

Other vigilantes denounce organised public insecurity. A pertinent example is the social uproar against Tcharmil, an urban youth subculture whose adherents wear unconventional clothing and hairdos, use their own jargon and carry swords in the streets. They “roll out flamboyant clothing and jewellery and fondness for the violent courtesies of the street” (El Maarouf & Belghazi, 2018, p. 293). For El Maarouf and Belghazi, “Tcharmil captures both an enigmatic and an intricate moment of mélange” (2018, p. 292), incarnating the sense of superiority inherent in taking over a public space and the boastful intention of unsettling local stability. Thinking of themselves as renegades, Mcharmil3 transform the violence they feel and experience into social deviance and fury at the unwelcoming, unsatisfactory city.

Vigilantism, in contrast, shaped the public reaction to this violence. Online, anonymous citizens launched a “Zero Grissage” campaign to end Tcharmil hostility. Persistent theft and aggression by Mcharmil obliged some inhabitants in Casablanca to elect neighbourhood watches against attacks (Lesiteinfo, 2016). Due to frustration with Tcharmil’s

3 Youngsters who follow Tcharmil as a lifestyle.
chaos, and amid mounting distrust, people took the law in their own hands. They accused the state of inability to maintain public security. However, other citizens refrained from forming neighbourhood militias against Tcharmil militias (Bladi.info, 2016). To curb the lawlessness, “between the 1st of January and the 30th of June, 256 171 persons were arrested [...] in reaction to the ‘Zero_Grissage’ hashtagged protests on social media networks” (El Maarouf & Belghazi, 2018, p. 299).

Individual vigilantes, the most widespread type of vigilantism, highlight one-off incidents. People use phone cameras to record attacks by burglars, sexual assaults or problems in medical facilities. In these cases, generally, street vigilantes develop an empowering pattern of documenting misconduct, sharing the material on social media, creating uproar and bringing the wrongdoers to justice. Even when traditional media cover the mishap, viewers rush to social platforms because they trust them more, since they offer the possibility to access unedited content, interact with trustworthy individuals and avoid official censorship and bias.

Analysis of a Digital Vigilantism Case: Student Assaults Teacher

Fig. 7.1 Safi Addakirapress. (2017). Shocking / Student assaults his teacher in Ouarzazate. YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aC-DjWwDFs8&has_verified=1
In this case study, an instance of individual vigilantism morphs into a community reaction and shows the ways digital visibility galvanises social action. This event consists of violence in a school classroom. Though it is an example of juvenile delinquency, it is neither organised, nor presents a threat to public security. It rather represents an instance of a spontaneous, one-off irregularity in which a student, due to details that pertain to his own circumstances, defies common norms and assaults his teacher inside the classroom. That is why, as a backlash to the original act, the digital uproar brings into focus the ways official irresponsibility and individual irregularity lead to public insecurity, though indirectly, in a complex post-2011 media and activism landscape.

**Context:** Because it is far from the central region, Ouarzazate rarely attracts public attention. The supposedly calm southern city became agitated in November 2017, a few weeks after the onset of a difficult political and academic period. First, the whole country eagerly witnessed the so-called ‘blockage’, a six-month political impasse after legislative elections in 2016. Video footage captured over-crowded classrooms due to faltering educational planning and incompatibility between infrastructure, human resources and the number of pupils. Equally, the role of teacher-training centres (aka CPRs) was hotly discussed online. For economic and educational reasons, the government had launched a plan to reduce the great shortage of staff by delegating the recruitment of teachers to regional academies. Teachers, especially in the first year of the plan, would join classrooms before receiving training that was not necessarily provided by CPRs. While CPR graduates protested the plan, university graduates were sent to classrooms without training. Online debates spiked when trained teachers were ignored in street protests, while the untrained teachers started teaching. The hasty solution of sending large numbers of untrained teachers into schools was punctuated by police interventions against teacher marches (Chalfaouat, 2017). Consequently, debates about legal fragility, financial precarity, overcrowded classrooms, lack of pre-service training and frequent police crackdowns on teacher protests played out on social media. This soured public opinion, creating conditions for the denunciation of educational policies and teacher vulnerability in schools.
Content: The short video starts with a chaotic quarrel inside a classroom. Many students are on their feet while one approaches the teacher with hostility. The student and the teacher engage in a short fight, before other students pull them apart. Many of the students go back to their seats. Another group of students keeps watching the violent scene, including the one who is shooting the video. Then, the hostile student leaves his seat again to attack the teacher who stands sheepishly close to his desk near the board. The student mutters that he will not accept insults against his mother. He jumps over a number of tables to reach the teacher and punches him repeatedly. The teacher, who seems unable to defend himself, falls down on the floor in utter humiliation. The punching continues for some time. Towards the end, it is not clear whether the other students are trying to terminate the fight or helping their classmate to assault the teacher.

Social media reaction: Once the video reached Facebook, users were outraged. The video circulated virally on a Sunday night, coinciding with an important football match. Social media users generally condemned the assault, notwithstanding the reasons behind the student’s misbehaviour. Blame was levelled immediately at the education authorities for the sordid conditions in which teachers worked, even in areas of the country that were assumed to be peaceful. Others denounced the exposure of teachers to cramped classrooms without the necessary pedagogical tools, and accused education authorities of being responsible for students’ inadequate upbringing. Teachers in particular felt empowered to demand more legal protection from unexpected incidents.

Press coverage: The highest levels of engagement with this event were from digital media. Many online outlets identified the high school to uncover the hidden sides of the story. They met the student’s classmates, whose standpoint was generally neglected in mainstream discussions. They revealed that the teacher had mental-health issues that, in normal circumstances, would have granted him early retirement. Visitors to e-news websites discovered that violent exchanges were common in that classroom. The teacher customarily insulted students, who retaliated by knocking him down. The only new element was the rampant visibility of video footage online. Other pupils accused local education administrations of a failure to deal with the problematic situation before
the incident: they had moved the teacher to a junior high school to curb the problematic outbursts, but brought him back because of a staffing shortage.

Other news items and articles delved into the direct reasons for the fight. They explained that the teacher insulted the student with references to his parents’ poverty. For instance, chouftv.ma, an online broadcaster, visited the student’s father in his greengrocery store, at which point he revealed that his son had been severely insulted in front of his classmates. Media in different cities collected citizens’ opinions on the mishap. They generally condemned the assault despite the potential causes. They also blamed the student’s parents for his inadequate upbringing. Other citizens stressed the ministry’s responsibility for the abyss into which the educational system had sunk. Yet, when asked about the solution, they generally agreed upon the imperative of receiving a good upbringing and being taught the right values at homes and schools. Citizens, too, felt empowered to further demonstrate the need for security in schools and expressed distrust towards the ministry for educational setbacks.

The story also reached local and international broadcast channels. The popular public channel, 2M, described the video content as causing shock and sorrow. As a manifestation of media convergence, or what Chadwick (2013, p. 2) termed as watching “a video of a video of a video”, 2M depended on social media debates to criticise the decadent value system inside classrooms and the awful attack on the teacher. The family of the student, on the contrary, was portrayed as begging for their child to be safe, although he had threatened the safety of the teacher. The mother of the student said that her son had been bitten and punched too, hinting at the absence of a secure environment inside his school, as well as in the prison where he was incarcerated at the time. With the viral spread of the video, security in educational institutions was questioned, with most fingers pointing at state representatives. When the school headmaster or the municipal education director (a government official) featured on public media, they reiterated that they knew about the teacher’s problematic classroom management, and they utterly condemned the student’s misbehaviour. However, they refrained from admitting responsibility for the circumstances that led to the fight. International news outlets in different languages, including Arabic,
Empowerment, Social Distrust or Co-production of Security

French and English, discussed the event, based on the uploaded video, Facebook tweets and statuses, as well as the opinions of Moroccan education experts and commentators.

**Workplace reaction:** Though the video was released on a Sunday, both the regional and local educational authorities issued press releases. This unprecedented response appeared to result from the online pressure. The authorities condemned the mishap, stressed the teacher’s dignity and required a police probe into the issue. Since the teacher did not complain after the fight, the ministry of education filed a suit against the student. Meanwhile, the teacher and the administration behind his problematic situation managed to avoid responsibility and punishment. The teacher was neither arrested nor moved to another school, at least not before the end of the academic year. In addition, education officials contented themselves with issuing press releases that denounced the irregularity, praised the importance of the teacher’s dignity and showed solidarity with his family and colleagues. On the other hand, three teacher unions called for a two-day strike to protest against working conditions inside classrooms (Chalfaouat, 2017). The viral video was an opportunity for them to require an end to the official discourse that had blamed teachers for the woes of the educational system before the incident. They also pinpointed the insufficient pedagogical and legal support for teachers inside high schools in particular. In a sense, the video’s organisational empowerment further encouraged unions to defend teachers’ rights, especially since the strike was the first after the government had passed a law to punish strikes financially. Due to the horror of the video, teachers and unions nationwide felt emboldened to challenge the law by going on strike regardless of potential salary cuts. They seized the opportunity to mobilise against the distressing situation.

**The family’s reaction:** Though the video blemished their image as parents, the student’s family engaged in media interviews to share their own interpretation of the event. The father replied to different online outlets and invited some to his greengrocer’s shop. The store, for which the student was ridiculed, was a typical venue from which Moroccans usually buy produce. Neither the father nor his job seemed degrading enough to bring insult or mockery. With that psychological empowerment, he could symbolically shift the quarrel in his son’s
favour. Despite the excessive shaming online, playing the victim of unjust ridicule empowered the father to provide a parallel interpretation to the official one, which attracted online sympathy. The student’s mother talked to different media outlets too. With her appearance and manner of speaking, she was portrayed as worthy of sympathy and as comparable to other mothers nationwide. She symbolically rejected any indictment of her upbringing for her son’s aggressiveness. They and their son apologised for the assault before the court’s final decision, according to their lawyer. Their online visibility and constant communication with the media caused a considerable change in families’ perception of the interaction between social media and law enforcement. Their advocacy helped clarify certain neglected points in the story, while their apology, as reported by the lawyer online, aimed to gain the sympathy of the court jury. Contrariwise, little was heard from the family of the assaulted teacher. It is possible they contented themselves with the individual and organisational impact of the video.

**State officials’ reactions:** Officials, especially those from the educational system, reacted in several ways. For instance, the president of the regional academy issued a press release on Sunday 5 November, and talked to the media. He fully denounced the assault, describing it as “non-educational”, expressed solidarity with the teacher, his family and colleagues, and pledged to prevent the recurrence of such incidents. In addition, the municipal education director issued another press release. He insisted on maintaining the rule of law and prioritising the teacher’s dignity. The delegation also formed a local taskforce to probe the event, and sued the student. Led by the municipal director, the taskforce also visited the assaulted teacher. When they asked him about the mishap, he surprised them by considering it as normal. They shared their astonishment with the press, possibly paving the way for what turned out to be an unexpectedly lenient sentence against the student. The president of the region council also publicised a press release. He asked the head of the government and the ministers of justice and education to amend the penal code in order to criminalise the assault of teachers. In the press release, he apologised to teachers and parents generally for the “classroom combat”, and described the assault as “tragic”, “horrendous”, “bestial” and “sorrowful” (Tatoo, 2017). He also reproached the student’s classmates for their inactivity. Moreover, the police announced
that they were detaining the student. The public uproar created considerable pressure to imprison the teenager, despite the teacher’s prior mistakes. However, the Public Prosecutor in a press conference considered the student a mere “reckless pupil” and described his detention as an “unfortunate development”. Nonetheless, signs abounded from senior officials that the student would be released, since he did not necessarily have criminal motives and since the teacher did not file any documented complaint even after the video had spread.

**Outcome and constructive co-production of security:** Because of the online and offline debates, the student was brought to court. He was sentenced to seventeen days in custody in Ouarzazate, in addition to spending two months in a juvenile rehabilitation centre in Marrakech. His parents, on the other hand, were fined two symbolic dirhams, one to be given to the teacher and one to the municipal delegation.

Since it was so widely viewed, the video’s constructive contribution to public security is multi-faceted. To start with, attacking a teacher inside a classroom was scorned and condemned severely. Though the teacher may have triggered the fight, thousands of comments online focused solely on the denigration of the assault and the resulting threat to the teacher’s safety in an increasingly hostile educational atmosphere nationwide. Teachers, students and parents, as individuals and organisations, seized the empowerment of the opportunity to demand that schools be made safe from verbal, physical or financial violence, or even sexual harassment. They also demanded measures to be taken to fight the drug consumption that exacerbates school violence. The moral outrage and mode of cyber-social order compelled the student’s family to apologise for the mishap online.

Second, different officials became involved in the issue. The head of the government, MPs, ministers and regional and local administrators commented on its developments online, or in press releases, parliamentary questions, media participations, apologies, etc. They might have reckoned on the impact of social distrust online, and agreed that the attack was unacceptable. Equally significant was the participation of police officers and the Public Prosecutor in the debate. They stressed the importance of the rule of law and promised to intervene adequately to maintain it. However, no laws were passed or amended to make the
social debates and advocacy online an instance of community empowerment.

Third, media outlets galvanised the issue in different ways. In the absence of raw proof, incomplete and imprecise stories overwhelm public discourse. With the viral video, however, the press approached different stakeholders, including families, classmates and officials. Outlets not only propelled a local event to a national or international audience, but also enabled almost all voices and standpoints to receive a hearing, which vividly enhances freedom of speech. Nevertheless, as in other digital vigilantism events, the press avoided interviewing the culprit and the victim in order not to affect the ongoing legal process, to protect them against mob justice or potential retaliation and to maintain their right to be forgotten.

Furthermore, the video encouraged different facets of empowerment. The public’s power of denunciation, to begin with, was emphasised when all influential stakeholders reacted to condemn the assault and require the detention of the wrongdoer. Moreover, students were empowered to rectify any potential misinformation. They shared the video to uncover a problematic situation that would have otherwise gone unnoticed. They protested in front of the school when their classmate was jailed and they talked to the media to add their own details and interpretation of the whole event. Teachers, as individuals and unions, equally felt empowered to fuel the uproar online and in the streets, since it was an opportunity to inform the public about their terrible working conditions. The assault was neither unprecedented nor surprising, given its distressing context. Public shaming of the recorded attack supported teachers to further criticise educational policies that endangered them. Parents were empowered too. Parents increasingly send their children to private schools despite the financial hardship the decision entails. They silently withdraw from overcrowded public schools, whose bad reputation spreads incessantly. The video boosted parents’ psychological empowerment, and offered them an opportunity to voice the double-edged, unfortunate dilemma of whether to send their kids to the problematic public sector or to the costly private one.

Meanwhile, developments around the video highlighted official irresponsibility. In a more democratic context, the violent content would uncover the lacunae of regional and local education mismanagement,
and condemn officials who denied the teacher early retirement. In addition, the student’s family blamed the teacher’s illness for their child’s offensive reaction, which reduced the prison term. These circumstances alarmed officials, including those in remote areas, about the possibility for sudden public derision of their malpractice. Without self-regulation and professional conduct being ensured, ubiquitous electronic tools can unexpectedly mobilise public debate. Officials must then talk in front of the cameras tactfully, despite a lack of training or the absence of solid justifications for professional incompetence.

Conclusions

To conclude, this chapter answers the research question: how does digital vigilantism manifest in Morocco, especially in terms of empowering different voices? It discusses the ways common citizens’ access to the media as a key resource morphs individual initiatives of sharing footage into social outrage online. Community, organisational and, especially, individual empowerment persists in consequence.

As a case in point, the chapter analyses different stakeholders’ reactions amidst the frenzy of an instance of school violence. Due to digital vigilantism, different individuals and organisations challenged or rectified discourses about the incident. From the interactions that erupted, several conclusions can be drawn.

First of all, digital vigilantism enhances change in Moroccan society. Victims and bystanders realise the importance of recording and sharing wrongdoing. Public support online empowers them to endure the humiliation of their ordeal. Instead of shying away, they expose their affairs online, which generates shaming and denunciation of perpetrators, and leads to their arrest. In situations such as the case above, sharing wrongdoing may mitigate vulnerability, though not all stakeholders are accountable for their contribution to the problem. However, the resulting online vibrancy embeds the potential for the rule of law to be reinforced. It helps Moroccan citizens to break their silence, since perpetrators are either brought to justice or apologise publicly. In short, social events, digital connection and vigilantism enable online empowerment, leading citizens to appreciate the importance of vigilantism, denunciation and doxing. The concurrent empowerment encourages social change and...
helps social media to improve citizens’ critical awareness and effective participation in improving their immediate environment.

Moreover, digital vigilantism stops short at revealing crimes. Moroccan citizens do not customarily take revenge after vigilantism. The police do not encourage citizens to take responsibility for themselves, as stability is key in the strategic narrative of exceptionalism (Fadel, 2016). Hence, the police foster a differentiation between vigilantism for a better society, and the ability to execute the rule of law. Consequently, citizens’ co-production of security is confined to keeping the public sphere under control. Today, common citizens function as a neighbourhood watch on social media. They report to the public online before the police intervene. If the police have already intervened, public pressure demands — and sometimes leads to — stricter sentences. Otherwise, vigilantism keeps the pressure online, without embodied intervention against wrongdoers.

Furthermore, digital vigilantism requires a responsive government. Even though vigilantism facilitates self-help, public contributions to the rule of law need encouragement. This may require setting up some platform for citizens to co-produce security, and the police to recognise doxing during investigations. For more successful vigilantism, the platform could link the promotion of civic virtue to the public interest and the avoidance of retaliation. Moreover, the police can incorporate the ubiquity of online opportunities for citizens by fostering participative security as a legitimate contribution to their work. As a result, substantial efforts may counter the current increased demands for security, and the visible expression of distrust in state efforts.

Finally, the culture of impunity that stems from the flawed judiciary and corrupt administration hinders a clear transition from vigilantism to changing laws. Vigilantism breaks the silence, enables the co-production of security and warns against recidivism. However, annual reports of transparency and anti-corruption institutions, such as the High Council for Accounts, reveal the ways that impunity hobbles development and democracy. Thus, more responsive legal institutions are necessary to reap the benefits of vigilantism. The current situation is on the threshold of a movement towards more respect for laws. Since vigilantism spotlights inadequacies in law enforcement and the repercussions of impunity, responsibility rests with legal agents to reduce the impact of perceived impunity on the social value of laws and on the seriousness of
responses to public demands for a safer environment. Otherwise, when such perceived impunity holds citizens back from smooth participation in democratising the lives of their community, distrust deepens, leading to an irreconcilable crisis in democracy.

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